

LA TERRE, IL COLORE (the earth, the colour)

by Andy Hunter

Across Europe, people are trying to recover their urban and rural narratives—the magic of place to create sustainable living and an art that celebrates life. If we do not connect with our own environments, how can we expect humankind to care enough to ensure conservationism for the future? Last September I attended, and contributed to, the 'Storytelling Landscape' gathering at Dryburgh.

Claudio Ascoli and Sissi Abbondanza of 'Chille de la Balanza' in Florence asked if I would join them in a storytelling venture – to tell the story of two elderly residents of Fiesole (just outside Florence), and in telling their stories, tell something of the story of the place.

I was very uncertain what I might be getting myself into, but having decided some years ago that on the whole, when in doubt, it's better to say 'Yes', I committed myself. I was to tell the story, in English, of a cobbler and painter, Paolo Tellini. My co-teller, Monica Fabbri, would tell the story of Silvana Boni in Italian.

Looking back, I wondered what had caused Claudio to think that I might be able to give what he wanted for this event. After the show, I asked him. He said that as soon as he saw me he could see a similarity between my eyes and Paolo's. People used to say that I have my mother's eyes. Hold on to that—it comes up later on in this story.

Over subsequent months I was sent the material—from interviews with Paolo, and some local legends, and I had the task of putting this into some sort of order. I remember stories mainly by their flow, so this one had to flow. Given, though, that there were several jumps from one picture to another, I did find this the most challenging storytelling I have ever done.

First I had to find a way to embrace this story and begin to make it mine. I was billed as 'il raccontatore inglese Andy Hunter, specialista di storytelling in bicicletta' – a friend suggested I should have that printed on a t-shirt! Finding my connection to this story was, I think, like waiting for a fish to jump. It took a while, but then it was the hand of fate which seemed the strongest thing linking my

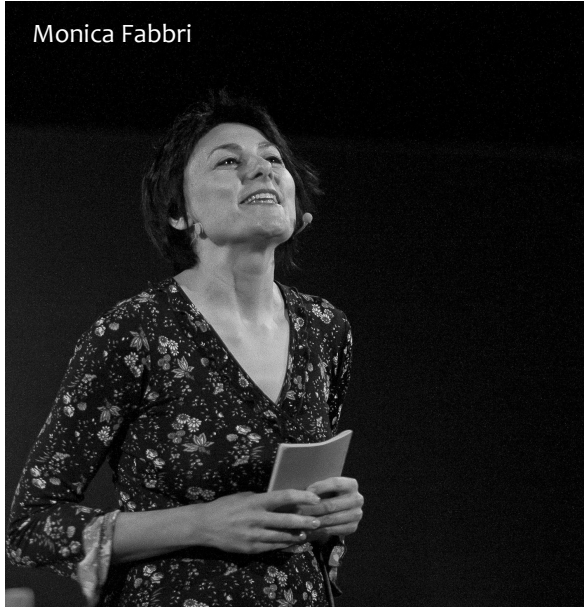
passage through life with Paolo's. So that became my starting point, and later, my ending point too.

It was a lot of work. Apart from the hours on my own I had three run throughs of the story with others. Once just reading all the material aloud to my family. Much later a session with Donald Smith at The Scottish Storytelling Centre who gave much helpful advice on 'staging' the story. And then one with Anne,



Andy and accordionist Giuseppe Cornacchia on stage.

Monica Fabbri



my wife, who, along with other suggestions, said 'Slow Down!' Which is what I needed to hear.

At last my departure for Florence, arriving late on the Thursday evening of 19th June. Met at the airport by Paolo Lauri, whisked to Chille de la Balanza's base at Atelier cooperativa sociale onlus. There I met many of the folk involved, and was overwhelmed by the warmth and friendliness—the openness—such a different culture. And then, after wine and pasta, to my hotel just outside Fiesole. Our performance was to be on the Monday night in the Roman Amphitheatre in Fiesole. Arriving at my hotel—or actually a hut outside it (to replicate, a little, Paolo's home) - with I can't remember how many folk to show me the way, I was introduced to the fireflies. I'd never seen them before—like will-o-the-wisps leading me on along this path that fate

had laid out.

Before breakfast the following morning I rehearsed the story. Already I felt better about it – more confident – it had become more meaningful; more real. Was it because I knew I was now almost in the place of the story, or was it the air, the soil, the climate, seeing the landscape, or the spirit of the place having its affect? Later that day I met Paolo. Along with Claudio and Valentina (she is the anthropologist who had done the interviews with him) we went to the Primo Conti museum and the amphitheatre and then lunched together. I spent the afternoon exploring Monte Ceceri (also part of the story).

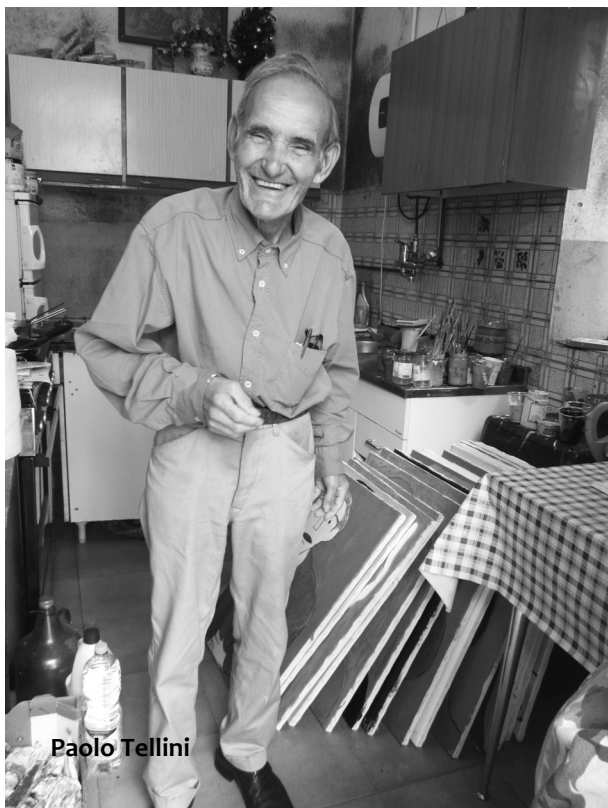
On Saturday there was an event 'Porta la tua sedia'. Folk were invited to bring chairs to the square on which to display Paolo's paintings. Along with singing and a lot of talking. It struck me that Italians give a lot of time to passing the time of day with each other—which may result in being late for the next meeting, but that might be better than rushing on by for the sake of punctuality? The main work

of the day was meeting Giuseppe Cornacchia, our accordionist, along with Claudio and Sissi, to put music and story together.

Every day I went through the story two or three times myself—and noticed more connections. In the story Paolo has to be able to see, and to touch, what he works with in order to believe in it. I don't remember if those were actually his words or if they were mine. What I noticed was that I really have to be able to see, and to touch, the story. Physical touching and emotional touching are not, I think, so far apart.

Sunday I had to myself until 6.00pm when the whole company assembled to put the show together and have a 'dress' rehearsal—storytellers, sound and light people, accordionist, singers and other behind the scenes folk.

On the Monday morning I walked to, amongst other places, the church of San Domenico. Here I found myself inviting the spirit of my mother to join us—I thought she would have greatly enjoyed the whole experience. But here is the thing – Paolo speaks of his mother. She comes into the



Paolo Tellini

story. So here was another way in which Paolo, I and the story were becoming yet more interlinked. And that night—the performance itself: in such a space. In the warmth of a southern night, under a darkened sky, I stood on a stage which has been used for more than 2,000 years. To be so rooted in the past and yet be right there in the present too. Silhouettes of the audience visible on the rising stone steps of the amphitheatre. And at the end, 42 singers on the stage with us. Such a wonderful climax.



Claudio's dream was to make links.

Between earth and colour; town and country; past and present; male and female; Italy and Scotland (or Southern and Northern Europe). All this carried—channelled—by two storytellers. I have been changed by this experience, and a week later was still reeling from the shock of seeing and feeling how different a culture can be to our own. I hope I don't change back!

I am so grateful to so many of the people I met. Claudio whose dream it was, Sissi who keeps things going in the background, Valentina who provided the material, Paolo whose story it was, Giuseppe for the music, Monica who told Silvana's story, and many others.

I have been profoundly touched. By the love the company has had for this project; by the faith Claudio, and others, had in me; by the experience of the story flowing through me; by the gift of one of Paolo's paintings—do I see it through his eyes, through my eyes, through our mothers' eyes? It has such a presence.

To give oneself up to the story is no small thing.

“La Terra, Il Colore” has been repeated in Florence and Aachen, and in a shortened version in Lisbon. It will be performed again during the International Storytelling festival in Edinburgh on 29th October.

Andy Hunter is no stranger to the pages of Facts & Fiction. He has contributed several articles about his Storybikes venture which combines cycling and storytelling, mainly in Scotland and the Borders.

I can really identify with the bit where Andy says he was changed by the experience and hopes he doesn't change back. I have felt that myself. You decide that you like this ‘new you’ and want it to stay. Then you return home to ‘reality’. Hopefully a little bit of it clings on...

